

The Changing College Dream: Differences Among Students' College Aspirations

Alexis Hellman, Rosalyn Rease, Melissa Bogert, Erich Iverson, William Hodes, and Shawn

Bergman

Abstract

Research has indicated that level of education may have a significant impact on occupational success later in life. Consequently, those who pursue higher education may be awarded with greater occupational opportunities, and a higher quality of life later on. Several factors including socioeconomic status (SES), demographics and parental attitudes have been linked to students' educational aspirations. Researchers will analyze data collected from 11 school districts in rural North Carolina, in order to observe how demographic factors, previous academic achievement, and perceived parental support may affect college aspirations. By assessing which factors are most predictive of college aspirations, the researchers hope to gain insight as to how early interventions can make the biggest impact and remain beneficial for previously underrepresented students.

Given the value of obtaining a college or advanced degree, it is important to understand the impact that high school students' educational aspirations play in their educational attainment. That is, the extent to which a student believes they should attain a higher level of education directly affects the drive, motivation, and effort they put toward the achievement of that goal (Qian & Blair, 1999). Higher educational aspirations in high school students are likely to encourage greater engagement with their goals, including time and effort put forth in pursuit of achieving those goals (Kay, Shane, & Heckhausen, 2016). Indeed, adolescent students who begin planning for college early on will be more likely to have higher educational aspirations, as well as enrollment and have success in post-secondary education (Poynton & Lapan, 2017). These findings suggest that beginning the college planning process earlier can influence high school students' educational aspirations and eventual educational attainment.

Student educational aspirations have shown to be significant in predicting educational and occupational status (Lee, Hill, & Hawkins 2012). Chenoweth & Galliher (2004) propose there are multiple factors that can influence a high school student's aspirations including socioeconomic status (SES), race/ethnicity, perceptions of college, and parents' level of education. Parental involvement plays a significant role in the decision of whether or not a student desires to pursue a college education (Qian & Blair, 1999). An ASHE Higher Education Report (2007) noted that parents with a low SES are more likely to view a high school diploma as the norm for their child, compared to parents with higher SES. In addition, the ASHE report (2007) stated low SES students are more likely to view college as an unrealistic option and were less likely to enter college than were high-income students.

The factors affecting educational aspirations are also moderated by racial and ethnic demographics (Qian & Blair, 1999). Some studies have shown that ethnic students have higher educational aspirations when compared to white students (Cheng & Starks, 2002), however, by their senior year educational aspirations tend to fall below that of white students (Griffith et al., 2005). This could be due to ethnic students lacking equal opportunities compared to that of white students, resulting in educational attainment being viewed as less relevant in achieving career goals (Qian & Blair, 1999). Research, however, has not looked at the extent to which the changes in these aspirations among minority students are related to academic performance or other factors that could limit their ability to be accepted into college.

Our study will look at the college aspiration levels of three different cohorts of high school students who are taking part in a college access program in 11 rural districts in North Carolina. Four years of surveys spanning grade eight, freshman, sophomore, and junior years will be used to assess the change in educational aspirations. The study will further examine how demographic factors (e.g., student race, ethnicity, parental education level, and SES status) along with academic performance (e.g., GPA and standardized test scores) and perceived family support relate to these changes. Interaction effects will also be examined to determine if academic and family influence differentially impact educational aspirations across various demographic subgroups. Results will enhance the collective understanding of how and why educational aspirations change in high school. By doing so, we seek to develop early intervention strategies that will close the gap between educational aspiration and educational achievement, especially for underserved and underrepresented groups.

References

- Cheng, S., & Starks, B. (2002). Racial differences in the effects of significant others on students' educational expectations. *Sociology of Education*, 75, 306-327.
- Chenoweth, E., & Galliher, R. V. (2004). Factors Influencing College Aspirations of Rural West Virginia High School Students. *Journal Of Research In Rural Education*, 19(2), 1-14.
- College Access and Admission. (2007). *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 33(3), 29-39.
- Griffith, A., Cohen, G., Ehrenberg, R. (2015). Explaining Racial Differences in Post-College Aspirations: Evidence from the NLSF. *American Education Finance & Policy*.
- Kay, J. S., Shane, J., & Heckhausen, J. (2016). High-school predictors of university achievement: Youths' self-reported relationships with parents, beliefs about success, and university aspirations. *Journal of Adolescence*, 53, 95–106.
- Lee, J. O., Hill,, K. G., & Hawkins, J. D. (2012). The Role of Educational Aspirations and Expectations in the Discontinuity of Intergenerational Low-Income Status. *Social Work Research*, 36(2), 141–151.
- Poynton, T. A. and Lapan, R. T. (2017), Aspirations, Achievement, and School Counselors' Impact on the College Transition. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 95: 369-377.
- Qian, Z., & Blair, S. L. (1999). Racial/ethnic differences in educational aspirations of high school seniors. *Sociological Perspectives*, 42(4), 605-625.